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ABSTRACT

To determine whether older students make more revisions in their essays, more kinds of revisions, or "bigger" revisions than younger students, a study was made of revisions made by 30 randomly selected seventh grade and 30 randomly selected eleventh grade students. Students were asked to write and revise twice essays in which they described a familiar place. Revisions were then counted and categorized according to linguistic size (sentence level, phrase level, and lexical level) and according to operation (addition, deletion, and reordering). Results did not show an increase across grade levels in the average number of revisions nor an increase in the number of types of revisions students used. Although the frequency and variety of revisions remained constant across grade level, size of revision did not. The eleventh grade students made many more subsentence-level revisions and many fewer sentence-level revisions. The shift from larger to smaller revisions was especially noticeable with addition and deletion revisions. Samples of student revisions are appended. (HOD)

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REVISION STRATEGIES OF SEVENTH AND ELEVENTH GRADERS

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CS 209 333

As students progress through the secondary-school grades 7-12, they tend to write longer essays, use longer and more kinds of sentences, and use richer and more varied vocabularies. In general, desirable characteristics of writing become more numerous, more varied, and bigger. But there is little evidence that revision characteristics follow this pattern of steady increase. The only published evidence suggesting increase in revision across secondary-school grades is a National Assessment of Educational Progress (1977) study. Because this study reported only percentages of students using certain types of revisions, not the actual numbers of revisions students made, and because the 13- and 17-year-olds were given very little time to write and rewrite and wrote on different topics, it does not provide clear evidence that older students revise more than younger students. Other studies of revision either ignore grade level or confound grade level with ability by comparing older, "expert" writers with younger "novice" writers. My own research (Land, 1984) with 7th and 11th graders suggests that revision is not incremental: older students do not make more revisions, more kinds of revisions, or "bigger" revisions than younger students.

I based this conclusion on a study of revisions made by 60 students, 30 randomly selected 7th graders and 30 randomly selected 11th graders assigned to heterogeneous English classes in a suburban western-Pennsylvania school district. (The district was chosen with purpose: it serves a student population which, with respect to race, standardized-test scores, parental income, and percent seeking higher education, is statistically typical of the national population.) For the study, students wrote

and twice revised essays in which they described a familiar place, a topic adapted from Bridwell's (1980) study of the revision behavior of 12th graders. Trained assistants, unaware of the nature of the study, compared students' first and final drafts, counted each revision, and categorized the revisions. The scheme for categorizing revisions was also adapted from Bridwell: revisions were categorized according to linguistic size (eg. sentence-level, phrase-level, lexical-level) and according to operation (eg. addition, deletion, reordering). (Appendix A offers notes on counting procedures and Appendix B offers examples.)

Results

Number of revisions. Table 1 shows the frequencies and percentages for each type of revision students made at each grade level. As the totals for each grade show, there was no increase across grade-level in the average number of revisions. Both groups averaged about 26 revisions.

One explanation for this numerical stability of revisions might be that the 11th graders would have revised more (as might be expected), but the topic was relatively easy for them; therefore, they didn't have to revise very much. But the hypothesis that assignment ease results in fewer revisions does not seem to hold. At both grade levels, those students who were judged as being higher-ability writers prior to the experiment made many more revisions than those judged to be of lower ability. Presumably, the assignment was relatively easier for the higher ability students. Hence, the lack of grade-level difference is probably not a simple artifact of grade-level difference in assignment ease.

Table 1

7th and 11th Graders' Revisions: Frequency (#), Percentage (%), and Cumulative Percentage (Cum.%)

Grade 7 (n=30)				Grade 11 (n=30)			
Type	#	%	Cum.%	Type	#	%	Cum.%
SA	132	17	17	PA	81	11	11
SD	130	17	34	LS	81	11	22
LS	71	9	43	LA	74	10	32
LA	57	7	50	PD	68	9	41
LD	56	7	57	LD	68	9	50
MC	48	6	63	SA	61	8	58
PA	40	5	68	SD	46	6	64
CB	37	5	73	CD	41	5	69
PD	36	5	78	CA	36	5	74
CD	31	4	82	MC	33	4	78
UC	29	4	86	CB	28	4	82
CA	21	3	89	AG	24	3	85
SO	17	2	91	SO	21	3	88
KN	15	2	93	SS	19	2	90
IC	14	2	95	KN	18	2	92
PO	13	2	97	LO	16	2	94
AG	12	2	99	PO	16	2	96
SS	11	1	100	IC	16	2	98
LO	6	1	101	UC	15	2	100
CO	5	1	102	CO	3	1	101
Total number of revisions = 781				Total number of revisions = 765			

Key: SA,CA,PA,LA and SD,CD,PD,LD correspond to Sentence, Clause, Phrase, and Lexical Additions and Deletions. SO,CO,PO,LO correspond to Sentence, Clause, Phrase, and Lexical Order Changes.

CB corresponds to Combinations

KN corresponds to Kernalizations

IC corresponds to Indentation Changes

AG corresponds to Agreement Changes

SS corresponds to Spelling Changes

MC corresponds to Punctuation Mark Changes

UC corresponds to Capitalization Changes

LS corresponds to Lexical Substitution

Another explanation might be that student writers only have a certain amount of tolerance for revision, especially of school-sponsored, in-class assignments like the one used in this study (see Monahan, 1984). Better writers will revise a bit more than poorer writers, but, after making a certain number of revisions, all writers will settle for the text they have produced regardless of its potential for change. As Knoblauch and Brannon (1984, p. 62) put it, "Coherence, we might say, is what a writer settles for at the point where the promise of exploration is abandonded to the expediency of circumstance." For secondary-school student writers, who can produce relatively coherent first drafts on topics like "describe a familiar place," the "promise of exploration" may wear thin after three drafts and about 26 revisions.

Variety in revision. Not only was there no increase across grade in the number of revisions students made, there was no increase in the number of types of revisions students used. Both the 7th and the 11th graders used, on average, 9.5 of the 20 types of revisions listed in table 1. Again, the hypothesis that the relative ease of the assignment resulted in an artificially lowered count for 11th graders is not supported by ability-level data. Within grade, the higher ability students used slightly more types of revisions. The fact that higher-ability students used, on average, only one more type of revision than the lower-ability students and the fact that even the lower-ability 7th graders, as a group, used all of the types of revisions, suggests that variety in revision is very stable for secondary-school students. They know, all along, how to make different types of revisions and readily use a fair range

of those revisions.

Size of revisions. Although the frequency and variety of revisions remained constant across grade level, size of revision did not. The 11th graders made, on average, many more subsentence-level revisions and many fewer sentence-level revisions. The shift from larger to smaller revisions is especially noticeable with addition and deletion revisions. (Addition and deletion revisions seem especially worthy of study because they are the most common types used, they are the easiest to count, and they are the easiest to interpret as intentional changes in essay content.) Table 2 shows the frequencies and percentages of additions and deletions at four levels: sentence, clause, phrase, and lexical. Figure 1 reveals the shift even more clearly. Especially at the sentence and phrase levels, the 11th graders revised differently from the 7th graders. Indeed, multivariate analysis showed that the overall shift toward smaller revisions was significant at the .002 level.

As with the other results, the shift toward smaller revisions might be explained by suggesting that the assignment was easier for 11th graders. In this instance, ability-level data support this explanation: higher ability students made more subsentence- and fewer sentence-level revisions at each grade level. But other explanations may be equally plausible. It is possible that, contrary to common interpretations, smaller revisions are more important than large revisions and that the shift toward smaller revisions is a sign of growth. This explanation suggests that more sophisticated revisions involve entering and refining the existing text--

Table 2

7th and 11th Graders' Additions and Deletions at the Sentence (S), Clause (C), Phrase (P), and Lexical (L) Levels

Grade 7 (n=30)				Grade 11 (n=30)			
Type	#	%	Cum.%	Type	#	%	Cum.%
S	262	34	34	P	149	19	19
L	113	14	48	L	142	19	38
P	76	10	58	S	107	14	52
C	52	7	65	C	77	10	62

Table 3

7th and 11th Graders' Additions and Deletions at the Sentence Level and Sub-Sentence Levels

Grade 7 (n=30)			Grade 11 (n=30)		
Type	#	%	Type	#	%
Sentence	262	34	Sentence	107	14
Sub-Sentence	241	31	Sub-Sentence	368	48

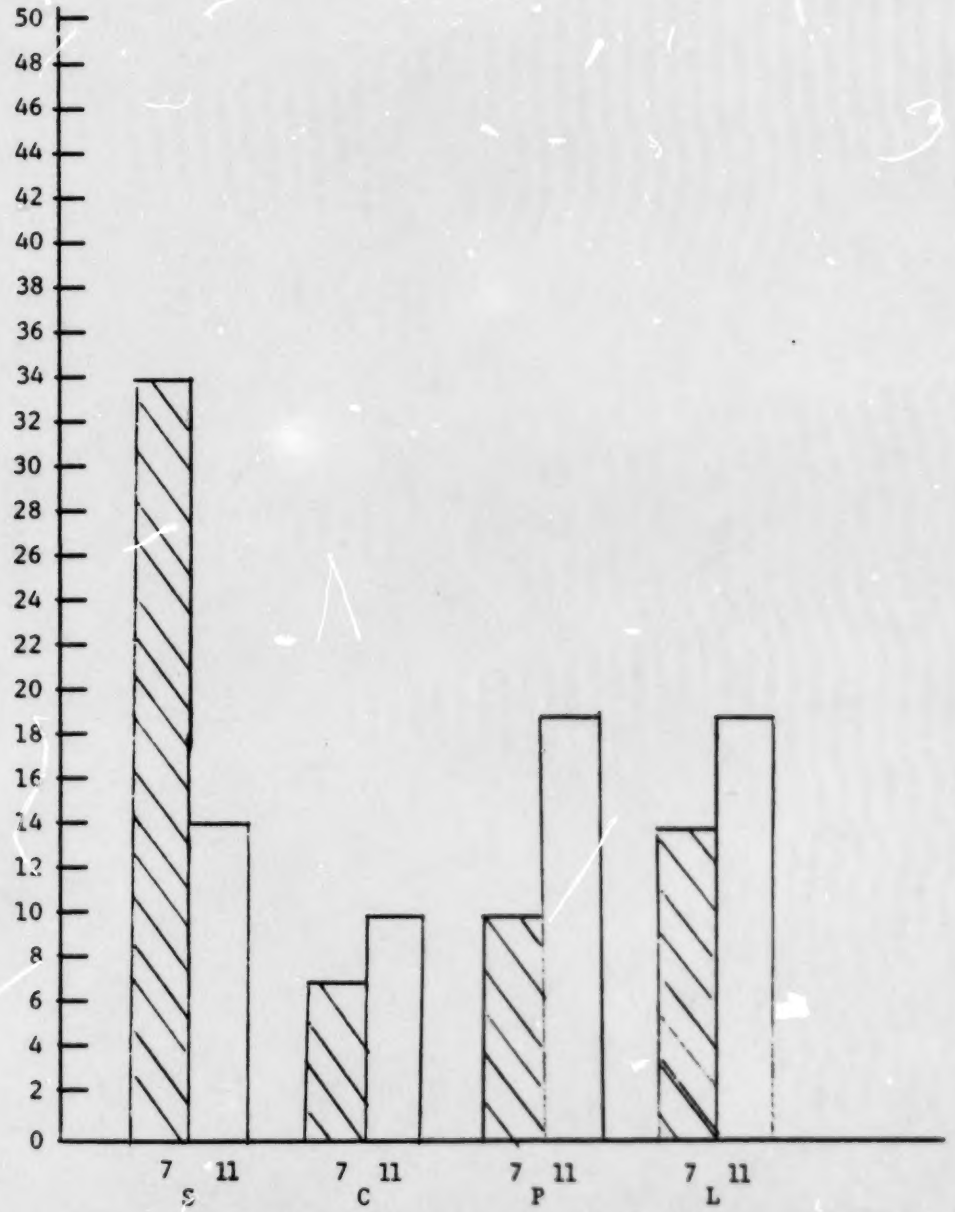

Figure 2. Percentages of 7th and 11th graders' Sentence (S), Clause (C), Phrase (P), and Lexical (L) additions and deletions.

the existing "vision"--and modifying just one part of a particular proposition. In the sample passage from the 11th grader (Appendix B), the addition of phrases "time worn" and "in the herb garden" and the deletion of phrases "with mosquito netting" and "near the plastic wading pool" seem to be clear evidence of the writer's intentional effort to sharpen, refine, make more coherent, the description of an 18th-century country home. Even if plastic wading pools and mosquito netting may have belonged in a completely objective description of the place, the revisions have the effect of directing the reader's attention toward a more desirable picture of the setting.

By comparison, the 7th grader's revisions (Appendix A) seem less purposeful. Except for the lovely sentence-level revision, "it seems like the sun is just sinking into the ocean to cool off because of the hard work it put in for the day," this student's revisions detracted, if anything from the original description.

Another explanation for the shift is that students distribute their revision efforts more evenly as they get older. Sentence-level revisions, the mainstay for 7th graders, are used more selectively by older students. This explanation suggests that size does not determine the worth of a revision and that growth in revision ability is related to the student's ability to choose a contextually appropriate revision.

Implications for Research and Teaching

Implications for research. One of the most important limitations of this study is that it did not account for the possible relationship

between assignment difficulty and revision. Results from research comparing expressive and pursuasive tasks (Crowhurst, 1983) suggests that composition task does not affect revision; however, research comparing revision for peer and teacher audiences (Monahan, 1984) suggests a possible interaction between ability and audience. Future reseach should include multiple tasks to control for the possibility that difficulty affects revision and to allow investigation of factors which may affect revision, a seemingly stable phenomonon.

The findings of this research have special significance for researchers planning multifactor designs to study revision. Results indicate that a grade-level factor cannot be counted on to reduce unexplained variability in the number or number of types of revisions students make. The practical consequence of this is that, while grade level is certainly a factor worth study, including a grade-level factor will use up degrees of freedom without increasing power. Consequently, researchers wishing to study revision across grade should increase their sample size.

Because revision is not related in the same way to both ability and grade level, researchers comparing "expert" and "novice" writers should be particularly careful not to confound factors. A comparison of older experts and younger novices may yield results caused by experience for one variable and caused by ability for another. Or an ability- by grade-level interaction may mask an important main effect.

Aside from design implications, this research suggests that researchers carefully consider how they label revisions if they use a system of categorization which includes size of revision. Using labels like "higher

order" to describe longer revisions or "surface-level" or "small" to describe shorter revisions may be begging the question. One interpretation of the results of this research is that "smaller" revisions, especially phrase-level additions and deletions, indicate maturity. Labels which suggest that "bigger is better" may mislead the researcher and the reader.

Implications for teaching. Grade-level differences do not necessarily imply pedagogies. There is a good deal of evidence that it is harmful to teach Little League pitchers to throw a curve ball. Similarly, it may be harmful to try to teach 7th graders to revise like 11th graders; moreover, it may be unnecessary. However, if, as this research suggests, students tend to shift from making larger to making smaller revisions as they mature, teachers may need to modify their expectations. This may apply especially to teachers of college freshmen. Conventional expectations are that, during their pre-collage years, students have made steady increases in writing abilities, including steady increases in the ability to make "big" revisions. This research suggests that students have become accustomed to making "smaller" revisions. Teachers expecting revision to result in radically transformed texts will probably be very unhappy. If teachers of older writers wish their students to produce radically transformed texts, they may have to create special conditions beyond simply asking for revision. Having students rewrite essays for a different audience or from a different narrative stance may do more to introduce students to the generative power of discourse than revision ckecklists or admonitions.

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APPENDIX A:
NOTES ON COUNTING REVISIONS

General Principles

For this study, I directed my assistants to explain any identified change in text in the most parsimonious fashion possible. Although a single revision might involve more than one change, those changes which were a consequence of the larger change were ignored. For example, in the 7th grader's passage (Appendix A), the word "fish" was added to the end of a series of activities. To add this word, it was necessary to place "and" in front of it. Because the "and" was added as a consequence of adding "fish," the "and" was ignored and the student was credited with one lexical addition. Similarly, changes in capitalization, punctuation, case, tense, number, and additions and deletions necessitated by combining or kernalizing were ignored. In practice, most changes were counted as only one revision; however, some counted as two, especially when they involved combinations and deletions or order changes.

Additions and Deletions

These proved to be quite easy to notice and count. For this study, we counted as sentence-level additions and deletions all independent clause additions and deletions. In the case of deletion, we viewed the change as a two-step process where the student first kernalized the independent clause and then deleted it. In the case of addition, we assumed that the student first made up a new sentence and then combined it with existing material. Revision #24 in the 7th grader's passage (Appendix A) is a good example of an addition we decided to count as a sentence addition. Revision #1 in the 11th grader's passage (Appendix B) is a good example of a deletion counted as a sentence deletion.

Other Revisions

Punctuation, capitalization, indentation, and order changes presented few challenges. Agreement changes, while sometimes difficult to notice, were fairly easily defined as any change in case, tense, or number made to gramatically align one word with another when both appeared in the original text. Spelling changes included changes in contractions and in inflection which were isolated. The 7th grader's change from "there's"

to "there is" (revision #16, Appendix A) and the 11th grader's change from "edge" to "edges" (revision #6, Appendix B) are examples of these kinds of spelling changes.

Substitutions usually involved single word changes. Frequently, these single word substitutions involved more than replacing the existing word with a synomym. For example the 11th grader substituted the word "porch" for the word "front" (revision #17, Appendix B). Also, substitutions often involved more than one word. For example, the 7th grader changed "all colors" to "pink and light blue" (revision #26, Appendix A).

A change was counted as a combination whenever an existing or added structure was attached to an existing structure. The 11th grader's addition of the phrase "in the herb garden" also counted as a combination (revisions #15 and #16, Appendix B). In addition, transformations that reduced existing structures to relatively more dependent ones were counted as combinations. The reduction of "has a bleached-white look" to "bleached" was counted as a combination (revision #4, Appendix B).

A change counted as a kernalization whenever an existing structure was made more independent. The 11th grader's separation of the final independent clause from a compound sentence to create and independent, simple sentence is a straight-forward example (revision #18, Appendix B). The 7th grader's transformation of "the sunset" to "the sun sets" is a less obvious example of a change counted as a kernalization (revision #23, Appendix A).

APPENDIX B :

PASSAGE FROM A 7th GRADER

First Draft

...If you don't want to swim you can bring your bike and ride the roads.[8] The roads aren't like highways.[12] The cars can only go one at a time.[13] You can sit[15] and build sandcastles in the sand. There's lots of sand everywhere[17] and its soft and smoothe.[18] I especially like to go[20] at night when you can watch the sunset. The sky turns all colors and its real pretty. You can rent a sailboat and go sailing.[27] There's lots of sights to see.[28] You can take pictures of just about everything[4]....

Third (Final) Draft

...There are other things to do[1] besides swim[2] you can take pictures,[3,4] go for a walk,[5] ride[6] your bike,[7,8] just ride in your car,[9] get some sun,[10] and fish.[11,12,13] Also,[14] you can[15] build sandcastles in the sand. There is[16] lots of sand[17,18] so you don't have to fight for a spot.[19,20] Then[21] at night when[22] the sun sets[23] it looks like the sun is just sinking down into the ocean to cool off because of the hard work it put in for the day.[24,25] The sky turns pink and light blue[26] and its real pretty....[27,28]

Analysis (Revisions are numbered in third draft; deletions are also numbered and underlined in first draft.)

Addition		Deletions		Other		Other	
Sentence	1,24	Sentence	12,13,18,20,27,28	Combination	2,25	Agreement	
Clause	19	Clause	22	Kernalization	23	Spelling	16
Phrase	5,9,10	Phrase	4,8	*Substitution	6,26	Sentence Order	
Lexical	11,14,21	Lexical	15,17	Punctuation		Clause Order	
				Capitalization		Phrase Order	3,7
				Indentation		Lexical Order	

*Lexical and sometimes phrase.

APPENDIX B:

PASSAGE FROM AN 11th GRADER

First Draft

...The house itself is the outstanding feature amongst all this beauty. Built in the 1700's, this house has been recorded as a historical landmark for its fine old architecture.[1] The red brick has a bleached-white look to it in many[5] places. Support colums along the edge of the old[7] house add an elegant look to the old place. A blue BMW is parked in front of the porch, which is screened in with mosquito netting.[12] A gas grill has its place near the plastic wading pool,[14] and baby dolls and a tricycle clutter the front steps....

Third (Final) Draft

...The house itself is the outstanding feature amongst all this beauty. Built in the 1700s,[1] the red brick of the house[2] is time worn[3] and bleached[4] in[5] places. Support colums along the edges[6] of the[7] house add an elegant look to the otherwise[8] "stiff"[9] architecture.[10] A blue BMW is parked in front of the screened-in[11,12] porch and a gas grill is nestled[13,14] in the herb garden.[15,16] Baby dolls and a tricycle clutter the porch[17] steps[18]....

Analysis (Revisions are numbered in third draft; deletions are also numbered and underlined in first draft.)

Additions		Deletions		Other		Other	
Sentence		Sentence	1	Combination	4,11,16	Agreement	
Clause		Clause		Kernalization	18	Spelling	6
Phrase	2,3,15	Phrase	12,14	*Substitution	9,10,13,17	Sentence Order	
Lexical		Lexical	5,7,8	Punctuation		Clause Order	
				Capitalization		Phrase Order	
				Indentation		Lexical Order	

*Lexical and sometimes phrase.